INSIGHT

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Lessons Learned

We are all currently facing challenges at many levels due to the presence of the Coronavirus pandemic. Health and safety of loved ones and those we serve are paramount. Conditions of life have been dramatically altered – work and social distancing, public health and safety, global and local economics. While much is unknown, there is much that we have already learned about Coronavirus and its impact on the world, our neighborhoods, and ourselves. As the saying goes "*stars shine brightest in the darkest night*" – and we are witnessing at times of greatest dark challenge, the demonstration of heroism, leadership, character, and resiliency in a variety of ways. Federal and state leaders, first responders, county governmental administrators and program supervisors, service providers, educators, and a host of volunteers have had the opportunity to shine in a dark time.

Difficult times do not make nor break us… but they do reveal who we are and what we believe. Sickness brings a share of blessing with it in the stores of love and sympathy it reveals. We have all been separated from a noisy, wrestling world and many things that divide us – to focus on serving one another, finding solutions, overcoming obstacles around a common goal… that has drawn us (even amidst our social distancing) together.

Times of crisis teach us great lessons that can be learned no other way. With optimism and fortitude, each of us will collect many lessons learned that will change us for the rest of our lives. May one of the greatest lessons learned be that we do not lament that rose bushes have thorns, but rather rejoice that **thorn bushes have roses**.

Practical Guidance for Capitalizing on Lessons Learned

Capturing lessons learned should be an on-going effort throughout your annual business cycle or project development. This mindset should be strongly encouraged by leadership from the outset. Whether we are using lessons learned to prepare for current operational change, or for identifying process improvements, or possibly mobilizing our workforce or service delivery in a crisis situation (like we are facing now with the Coronavirus pandemic), we learn from operational or project failures as well as project successes. By not learning from failures we are doomed to repeat similar situations. By not maximizing on successes, we miss opportunities to implement good processes and practices to successfully deliver existing and future services.

Lessons learned are the documented information that reflects both the positive and negative experiences of operational change (typically in the form of an initiative or project). It allows for a consistent form of knowledge and experience transfer, from current staff to future staff involved in the delivery of services. Just imagine how much knowledge and experience walk out the door every time a staff person leaves to take on other employment. It is all too common that the vacating employee leaves a significant knowledge "hole" in operations that cause increased difficulty and stress to those who follow.

Many organizations do not routinely capture lessons learned because there are no defined lessons learned process in place. Or, if there is knowledge and experience documented during an initiative or project, often organizations never do anything with them.

Lessons Learned – General Background

Organizational learning occurs on in every instance of change, and in every new initiative or project. We are now living through an unprecedented array of circumstances that bring with them a host of unknowns. Each level of government (Federal, State, County, Local) is challenged with doing business differently – immediate rapid change impacting everyone. Crisis management does not afford us the luxury of inserting detailed "process" (which recording lessons learned is

How much "knowledge" walks out the door when staff leave?

part) – we must act now, and document later. However, if the recording of the lessons learned during this crisis situation is not done at some point, or even in brief notes, a great opportunity for future preparation will be lost with the next crisis occurs.

We learn from our own experiences as well as the experiences of others. Sharing this knowledge (these experiences) helps prevent an organization from repeating the same mistakes and prepares them to take advantage of organizational best practices. Innovative approaches and good work practices can be shared with others. Lessons learned can be used to improve future operations, initiatives, and projects.

It is not necessary to wait until the end of the operational change or project for the learning to occur. Lessons can be identified at any point along the way. For instance, has someone recorded in operational notes how to implement the conversion to telehealth approved by OMHSAS… or in the actions taken to assure staffing and human resources were addressed… or in communication with clients and members about service delivery changes… or the set-up protocol for permitting staff to operate from their homes? The process may be facilitated as easily as asking staff and managers to keep a journal of key actions, steps, and issues that can be reviewed at a future time, when the crisis has subsided. Lessons are learned in real time. If you wait until the end the event such as the Coronavirus crisis or a large project you will miss some of the key lessons, because over time, staff and supervisors will forget some of the things they learned.

Here is Some Practical Guidance

Organizations are at a loss because there is often no defined process in place for the collection and use of lessons learned. Most often, key staff have deep experience in handling significant events, and become the "go-to" person for guidance. This condition creates an operational vulnerability if that "key person" leaves or is unavailable. A very basic outline (see illustration below) provides a framework to capture and use lessons learned.

IDENTIFY
• Key events where experience or knowledge has grown; actions taken.

DOCUMENT
• Impact; consequences; recommendations; risk; opportunities.

ANALYZE
•Strategic examination to apply opportunities; mitigate risk.

STORE
•Journal in knowledge repository; memorialize successes and failures.

RETRIEVE
•Use in subsequent planning; strategic initiatives.

Identifying significant lessons learned can be done at various levels of the organization by a number of staff. It may help staff identify what is a significant event by training them in advance (i.e. that this is an expectation, and to provide a process to follow). The use of categories helps staff organize their thinking to help ensure that key information is not missed. Categories might include staff resources, technical issues, communication, business workflow / process, requirements, design, testing, implementation issues, cost, and environmental factors. These categories can be customized or made more detailed as needed. In very simple terms – staff should be encouraged to identify what went right… what went wrong… and what needs to be improved.

Once the significant lessons learned are identified, someone needs to **document in a standardized way the details of the lessons learned**, descriptive information so that others can understand the circumstances and context, what went well, what was weak, and factual information about outcomes. It may be helpful to have a template upon which to document key events, with a consistent way of recording information.[1]

Analysis of the lessons learned can be performed as a post-mortem review of a project or operational change to evaluate how it went (retrospective evaluation). This step is very important because failures can be analyzed and corrected in the future, and successes can be promoted as a basis for future actions. Information and decisions made at the analysis step can be communicated to others within the organization to help planning and future training efforts.

A repository or library (using either paper documentation, or more preferably, a library of electronic documents or summary reports) should be established as a staff resource and made available to staff involved

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[1] Consistency of input information allows for speedier identification of reoccurring issues and proactive resolutions. An example of an effective lessons learned tool would be a consistent lessons learned input form. The lessons learned input form is a key tool. This document allows for more consistent data collection as well as provides a means for easier retrieval. The lessons learned template should include previously agreed to fields such as: category, lesson learned, action taken, how did you arrive at the action taken, root cause and key words. Key words should always be identified. Key words are ultimately one of the determinants of success in utilizing lessons learned and are essential for easy retrieval.

in operational change and project initiatives. The repository would **enable retrieval of the knowledge collected** to be used as a part of planning for all future initiatives.

The final important step to ensure a successful lessons learned program is a commitment from senior level management. That commitment is visible through routine repository review, actions taken to implement best practices, and support to improve negative or re-occurring project trends.

Excerpts for the article above taken from: Rowe, S. F. & Sikes, S. (2006). Lessons learned: taking it to the next level. Paper presented at PMI® Global Congress 2006—North America, Seattle, WA. Newtown Square, PA: Project Management Institute.


Navigating Uncertainty

As human beings, we haven't evolved to like uncertainty much. It's unsettling and uncomfortable, and the more primitive part of our brains inordinately dislikes that feeling. As a result, we often find ourselves feeling stress, anxiety, fearfulness and even anger, none of which are terribly positive places to hang out mentally.

As the COVID-19 crisis takes hold, every day brings an escalation in responses as municipalities, regions and countries try to formulate a reasoned and effective response to a pandemic that is growing at exponential rates. This is a scale of uncertainty that few of us are familiar with, and one with which virtually no one is comfortable.

What's important to recognize is that while uncertainty is incredibly uncomfortable, massively stressful and—by definition—inconveniently unpredictable, it is possible to manage through it.[2]

We offer a survival guide to navigating, maneuvering and ultimately surviving challenging and uncertain times.[3]

Accept the uncertainty. The first step is always acceptance. We all have giant circles of concern, and much smaller circles that we actually control.
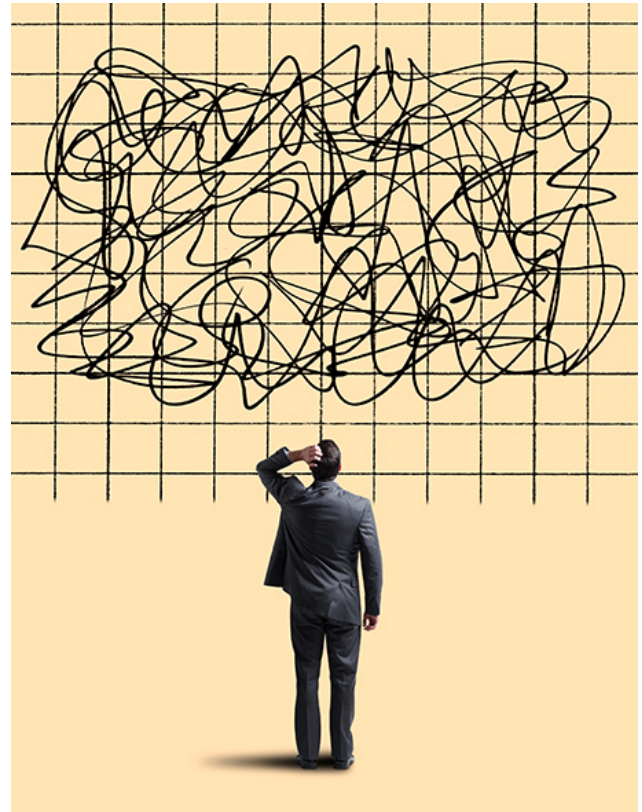
Acknowledge the things that are stable. For all that there is chaos, not everything is out of control. The sun will rise in the morning. Our loved ones—hopefully—continue to be our loved ones. There will be other constants. Just what those are depends on the situation—but hang on to them and appreciate them for being there.

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[2] Mullaly, M.; Navigating in Uncertainty: A Survival Guide; ProjectManagement.com; 4/1/20; https://www.projectmanagement.com/articles/619829/Navigating-in-Uncertainty--A-Survival-Guide

[3] Ibid. Survival Guide provided by Mark Mullaly. Mark is president of Interthink Consulting Incorporated, an organizational development and change firm specializing in the creation of effective organizational project management solutions.

Get perspective. Chaos demands response. Unrelenting chaos feels like it demands persistent and ongoing vigilance, which is enormously exhausting. Regardless of the crisis, take time—every day—to step back and get perspective. Do something, however small, just for you. That could be a walk, a workout, a quiet cup of coffee or a hug from a loved one. Those little moments are vital.

Prioritize what you need to deal with. Take stock of what is going on, what needs your attention and what can reasonably be deferred.

The most uncertain thing is not necessarily the most *important* thing. What needs your attention is not necessarily the thing that is currently holding it. There may be large, frightening unknowns. If they cannot be responded to and you have no leverage over them, then they are not what needs your current focus. Get clear on what your circle of control actually is and figure out the first step that you need to take within it. Do that.

For any uncertainty, ask what you know. For every situation that is unclear and uncertain, there are going to be aspects around it that are more stable and more predictable. The current coronavirus crisis is a case in point. We may not know what tomorrow looks like for us. But there are often examples from elsewhere that provide some sense of prediction. There are guides to what can make a difference, and to what responses are inappropriate. There are always going to be aspects that we do understand, or at least can extrapolate. Be clear about them. They are an important anchor for what comes next.

For each uncertainty, explore what you don't know. In other words, consciously identify and label the unknowns. If you can identify what's unknown, and acknowledge *why* it is unknown, then you can do something about it. These are going to be the grey and fuzzy areas around and between the things that we know. They are the risks and challenges we need to manage.

Consider the full range of outcomes. What's the best case? What's the worst? Recognize that both of those are possible.

Recognize that the reality won't necessarily be at the extremes. The extremes represent the long tails. The likely result is somewhere between those. The most extreme situation can happen, but it's not likely to. But while the real result will be somewhere in the middle, we have no control over where it actually shows up.

Consider what you can do to nudge a preferred response. What are the things that we can do to move the needle in our preferred direction? Is there something that we can do to move away from our worst-case scenario? Is there something that we can do to inch toward our preferred scenario? What we can do that changes probability or shifts outcome becomes a useful focus.

Identify what it will take to get more clarity—and *when* that is likely to be provided. Uncertainty isn't a permanent state, at least not usually. Crises are uncertain because there are things that we don't know—that we care a great deal about—right now. Define what they are. Then think about the questions that need to be answered, how those answers need to be gained, and when it will be possible to do that. In this way, one big uncertainty can be turned into a cascading series of incremental bits of information that actually get us moving toward certainty and understanding.

Write that down and try to let it go. An important thing to understand is that our brains obsess over and over again about particular details because they are trying to make sure that we don't forget. Without a trusted system to remind us, our grey matter flags again and again that we need to be thinking about a particular thing. This is particularly true for the giant uncertainties in life. Take the time to identify what will give the uncertainties greater clarity. Commit those things to paper. Once you have a concrete and clear list of *what* questions

need to be answered, *where*, by *whom* and *when*, your brain can let go. And that's a very useful thing.

Keep moving forward on the things that you can control in the meantime. This is possibly the hardest thing to do, and yet it is the most useful. You might have a giant, scary, massively in flux and nebulous problem in front of you. If you can do nothing about it right now, it's pointless spending time focusing on it. Instead, focus on the things that you can meaningfully do something about. Make the time you have productive and move forward the things that are relevant now. When the uncertainty coalesces into a clearer course of action, you can focus on it—knowing that you've already succeeded on several other fronts.

Uncertainty is scary, messy and nebulous. These are difficult and challenging times, and it would be very easy to find yourself in a place where the most

appealing option is to crawl under a rock and hide. There is nothing more impressive than acknowledging that reality, and then choosing to do otherwise. Uncertainty will always be present. We can't make it go away. There are days when it's more prominent, and others where it recedes into the background.

In all instances, we have a choice in how we respond. We can try to avoid, downplay and hide. And we can also rise to the occasion, embrace and demonstrate the control that is possible in even the most difficult situations. Surviving uncertainty is possible.

Excerpts for the article above taken from: Mullaly, M.; Navigating in Uncertainty: A Survival Guide; ProjectManagement.com; 4/1/20; https://www.projectmanagement.com/articles/619829/ Navigating-in-Uncertainty--A-Survival-Guide

AROUND HERE, HOWEVER, WE DON'T LOOK BACKWARDS FOR VERY LONG.

WE KEEP MOVING FORWARD, OPENING UP NEW DOORS AND DOING NEW THINGS, BECAUSE WE'RE CURIOUS... AND CURIOSITY KEEPS LEADING US DOWN NEW PATHS.

WALT DISNEY

Final Thought…

Change and Transition

"The essence of life takes place in the neutral zone phase of transition. It is in that interim spaciousness that all possibilities, creativity and innovative ideas can come to life and flourish." – Susan Bridges

Change is the external event or situation that takes place: a new business strategy, a turn of leadership, a merger or a new product – or a pandemic. The organization focuses on the desired outcome that the change will produce, which is generally in response to external events. Change can happen very quickly.

Transition is the inner psychological process that people go through as they internalize and come to terms with the new situation that the change brings about. Empathetic leaders recognize that change can put people in crisis. The starting point for dealing with transition is not the outcome but the endings that people have in leaving the old situation behind.
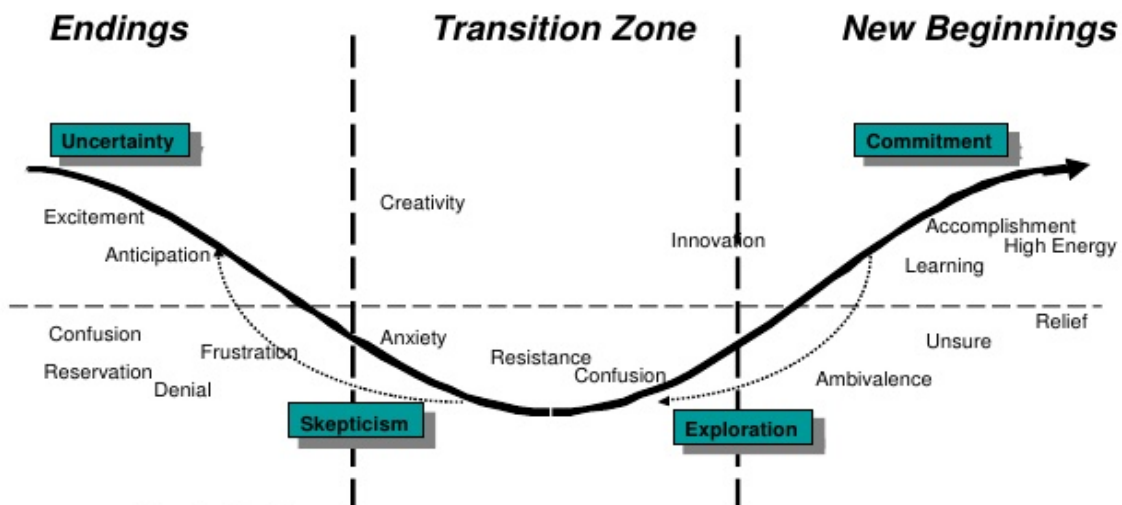
Change will only be successful if leaders and organizations address the transition that people experience during change. Supporting people through transition, rather than pushing forward is essential if the change is to work as planned. This is key to capitalizing on opportunities for innovation and creating organizational resilience.

The diagram below, used by Motorola, outlines the characteristics of each of the three stages people experience:

Managing Transitions

How people experience and react to change and its transitions can have a significant impact on the success of the initiative. The illustration below provides a good overview of how people experience change.

Experiencing Change and Transition

Endings

Transition Zone

New Beginnings

Uncertainty

Commitment

Excitement

Creativity

Accomplishment
High Energy

Anticipation

Innovation

Learning

Relief

Confusion

Anxiety

Unsure

Frustration

Resistance

Reservation

Confusion

Ambivalence

Denial

Skepticism

Exploration

Adapted from *Managing Transitions*, William Bridges

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